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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PTER](#) [FR](#) [MO](#) [AG](#) [MR](#) [WS](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA ON WESTERN SAHARA BEFORE VAN WALSUM'S
EXPECTED VISIT TO THE REGION

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: French MFA DAS-equivalent for North Africa Nathalie Loiseau indicated January 29 that France is increasingly impatient with UN-led talks on Western Sahara and believes the process may even be moving backward. She blamed part of French frustration on UN Personal Envoy Peter van Walsum, who will stop in Paris after visiting the region, but also on a growing concern about regional security. Loiseau claimed that France has decided it cannot possibly accept anything other than a solution based on autonomy within Morocco after the recent death of French tourists in Mauritania. A potential independent Sahrawi state posed too grave a risk in terms of AQIM terrorists having more sparsely inhabited territory in which to circulate. She expressed concern about recent provocations by Polisario and Morocco and claimed that France had asked Morocco to prevent a planned protest march across the berm to the Polisario-controlled town of Tifariti going ahead. Loiseau would like to have further discussions after van Walsum's tour focused on planning for further deadlock at the next round of talks in Manhasset. End summary

¶2. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent for North Africa Nathalie Loiseau met with us January 29, at her request, to review positions on the UN-led Western Sahara negotiations in advance of UN Personal Envoy Peter van Walsum's upcoming tour of regional capitals, Madrid, and Paris. Loiseau made clear at the outset that France had been disappointed by the last round of talks in Manhasset and hoped against hope that the round set for mid-March would make some progress. She was not optimistic, however, given the refusal of the parties to engage on the core issues and van Walsum's inability or unwillingness to press the parties to do so. As she would several times, Loiseau evinced strong skepticism that van Walsum was willing to or capable of putting sufficient effort into bringing about a negotiated settlement. She complained that the momentum was rapidly disappearing from the process and that it would soon be frozen like the overall dispute or even show signs of regression.

¶3. (C) With respect to van Walsum's intention to visit capitals (including Nouakchott), Loiseau said that the French had few details on his itinerary or on the level at which he would be received. The Moroccan leg was confirmed, but there was nothing about Algeria vis-a-vis the GOA or Polisario (i.e., including a side trip to Tindouf to meet with Polisario leaders). Loiseau stated that France had delivered a demarche to the Algerians urging them to receive van Walsum at a sufficiently senior level. As regards the Paris leg, Loiseau reported that van Walsum was currently scheduled to arrive February 18. That date was proving problematic, as presidential diplomatic adviser Jean-David Levitte would be unavailable. On the MFA side, Loiseau noted that FM Kouchner (who she claimed did not know van Walsum) was interested in a meeting if his schedule permitted. Loiseau asked whether van

Walsum planned to brief Washington officials after his tour.

¶4. (C) Loiseau expressed frustration at not knowing what van Walsum intended to say during his upcoming mission. She welcomed suggestions that he might hammer home his view that an independent Sahrawi state was not a viable outcome but was not sure he would actually follow through. The French are studying the draft interim UNSYG report following the third round of talks. Loiseau took some exception to van Walsum's evenhanded criticism of all parties for having failed to enter into real negotiations. She shared our understanding that the two sides had discussed confidence-building measures and various other elements (like local administration) that could figure in a final settlement but was not convinced that evidence of such limited engagement would lead to much else.

¶5. (C) As the conversation continued, Loiseau made clear that the GOF has decided to align itself more clearly than before with the Moroccan autonomy plan as the only feasible solution to the conflict. She explained that security was the major driving force behind this shift. Morocco's fragile security situation and its connection to the status of the Western Sahara figured prominently in French thinking. Loiseau said that Morocco alone among the key players on this issue had come up with a plan and made a good faith effort to negotiate on that basis. The others were stalling. Despite its imperfections and slow pace, Morocco was making progress on reforms. It deserved our support. Algeria and Polisario, meanwhile, had done little or nothing in response. Loiseau rejected the prospect of an independent Sahrawi state as not only unviable but an unacceptable security risk to the entire region. The murder of four French tourists in Mauritania had changed things fundamentally for the French government. Attacks and threats in Algeria had already underscored how France is one of the main targets for al-Qa'ida in the

Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The attack in Mauritania was a horrific reminder of the seriousness of this threat. She noted that it further exposed how easy it was for AQIM operatives to operate freely in Mauritania. Parenthetically, she described Mauritania as a regime on the edge of a precipice and said the U.S. and France need to discuss how to increase economic and other support. Loiseau's message on Western Sahara was clear, however: France could not accept giving AQIM another large, empty space in which to circulate with little or no control.

¶6. (C) Loiseau claimed that Moroccan Foreign Minister Fassi-Fihri had not gotten the unequivocal pledge of support for Morocco's position that he wanted when he last visited. She said, however, that France has privately told Algeria that it believed the Moroccan plan was the only realistic basis on which to achieve a settlement and that an independent Sahrawi state was not feasible. President Sarkozy has also publicly stated, in his speech in Morocco and to Arab journalists in Paris, that the Moroccan plan is the best basis on which to negotiate a solution. She chided the U.S. for being more circumspect in its public statements. Although France recognizes the risk to maintaining a balanced relationship with Morocco and Algeria, Paris also believed that the Algerians would ultimately be very pragmatic. Loiseau repeated that the Algerians continued to be remarkably restrained on this issue, perhaps because of the growing focus on mobilizing public support behind reelecting President Bouteflika to a third term.

¶7. (C) Loiseau lamented the unremitting hostility between Algeria and Morocco, although she was most critical of Algeria for openly admitting that it had no intention of improving ties until the Western Sahara issue was resolved. She was dismissive of the overly ideological mindset of the older generation in power in Algiers and was convinced that nothing would change until it finally passed from the scene. Loiseau criticized the Polisario for its saber-rattling in the context of a recent congress, but she also referred to the irresponsible efforts on the Moroccan side to raise tensions by organizing a protest march to Tifariti in the "liberated zone." The connections between the main organizer

and Moroccan intelligence were well known. Fassi-Fihri's protests over the Polisario congress in Tifariti and its activities in the areas east of the Moroccan berm were extensive and had caused French experts to review the area's legal status (the answer was that there was nothing to sustain Moroccan claims of a violation of the 1991 cease fire). France had firmly advised the Moroccan government to restrain the marchers to avoid a needless provocation. Loiseau left little doubt, however, that something like it would happen again.

18. (C) In concluding, we agreed that we would meet after van Walsum's regional tour and subsequent meeting in Paris. Loiseau suggested we discuss how to deal with continued deadlock after the next round of talks in Manhasset.

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